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ABSTRACT

This document presents a study of the effects of father absence upon the academic achievement of black children. Children in remedial reading and math programs from 20 Title I schools in a single midwestern metropolitan school district were studied. The father absence rate for black children in this school system averaged 30%. The study indicates that children from father absent homes are over represented in the Title I remedial reading program. Ranging from a low of 48.38% in the 5th grade to a high of 70.14% in the 3rd grade, their overall percentage is 58.17, nearly double the expectancy. An analysis of the Title I remedial math program reveals a similar pattern. With an expectancy of 30%, black children from father absent homes range from a low of 49.29% in the 5th grade, to a high of 64.51% in the 4th grade, with an average of 56.75%. No attempt was made to ascertain the percentage of white children from father absent homes in Title I remedial programs because no referent on which to base expectancy was available for this population. Nationally, the rate of father absence in white families is slightly over 10%. The over representation of black children from father absent homes in the Title I remedial program would tend to support the notion that father absence does have a definite effect upon some children's academic achievement. (Author/AM)

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Father Absence, An Overlooked Factor in the Lack of Achievement of Black Children in Title I Schools

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Although there has been a recent emphasis upon the early education of children by parents, most of the efforts have centered upon the tasks of the mother. This appears to be logical since most of the interactions of young child-to-adults are with the mother or a mother substitute.

As the banner for equality of educational opportunity is hoisted for children from low income backgrounds, continued efforts upon working with mothers to help their children towards school readiness is apparent. For young children; these efforts appear to demonstrate positive results in the primary grades, only to be lost in middle and upper grades, as judged by a careful study of achievement test scores in Title I schools and the never-ending number of remedial reading and remedial math programs.

Too often, the symptoms of the problem are treated, but not the causes. In the case of disadvantaged black children in Title I schools, the response to educational failure has been the enactment of more elaborate schemes for remediation. For the most part, these efforts have had limited results. Some of the lack of success of remedial programs may be due to the disregard of an important variable which may have a distinct effect upon the educational achievement of black disadvantaged youngsters---father absence. The increase in black families headed by a woman has risen at an alarming rate. In 1950, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census[1], only 17.6% of all non-white families were headed by a female, as compared with 8.5% for white families. By 1975, 10.5% of all white families were headed by a female, but for the non-white group, this had increased to 35.3%.[2]

Although the condition of father absence among blacks has a long-standing tradition dating back to slavery in America, many social scientists had predicted that as black men were afforded greater job opportunities in a society characterized by white racism; the rate of father absence would decline. Blacks still lag behind whites in most social and economic areas, but such changes as increased employment, including greater movement into higher paying white collar, craftsman and operative jobs, and impressive advances in educational attainment, as well as increased black college enrollment, fail to explain the tremendous gain of father absence in black family structures.

Rather than speculate upon the phenomenon of increasing father absence among black families, the thrust of this study is to acknowledge its presence and to look at the possible effects of this condition on the educational achievement of children.

A review of the literature regarding the effects of father absence reveals a mixed pattern. While Moynihan's highly controversial report, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action[3] makes a strong case for the problems resulting from father absent homes in several areas, it fails to make mention of studies regarding the academic achievement of black youngsters. Other studies, however, are available.

One such study of 60 children in a pre-school program from low income black families by Mackie and others,[4] found that subjects from father present homes did better as evidenced by test performance on several instruments. They also concluded that although the income level of father present homes was almost double those of the father absent type, the correlation between income and I.Q. was only .17.

Deutsch and Brown found that for males, females and the combined group, I.Q. scores of both white and Negro children were higher for those from father present homes. The study reveals an average intelligence score of 97.83 for children from father present homes as compared with an average score of 90.79 for those from father absent homes.

Another study by Deutsch[6] of 200 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children from low income families in a 99% Negro school, led him to conclude that although fatherless children scored significantly lower on school achievement tests, the broken home factor was not the basic determinant of group differences.

Coleman[7] regarded the effects of father absence insignificantly related to school performance except for youngsters from Puerto Rican, Chinese, or Mexican subgroups. A second analysis of the Coleman data by Tabler and others[8] led them to state that children from father absent homes scored lower than children from father present homes, but that all scores relative to father absence were insignificant when compared with race differences.

Using the Coleman model for a study of 2600 white and nonwhite students in grades one, three, six, and eight, Wilson[9] found mixed results. Comparing low SES students having high grades in English, he found that both Negro and white father absent boys scored better than father present boys. Additionally, it was found on verbal test scores that father absent boys scored signigicantly higher in third grade, lower in sixth grade, and no significant difference in the first and eighth grades. Wilson stated that the results were so mixed as to defy

interpretation, concluding that father absence is not a critical variable in regards to school performance.

Studying children in a "typical" Harlem school led Mackler[10] to conclude that school achievement was not significantly related to father absence.

A study by Wasserman[11] of Negro boys in a low income housing project from 117 families found no differences related to father absence in school achievement or school attitudes.

However, a study by Peterson and others[12] of almost 600 boys from low income families found that:

> Although it is necessary to exercise caution in interpreting the direct effect of family type on achievement due to a host of other factors probably associated with family description, the findings suggest a positive association between intact family and achievement, particularly for Negroes.[13]

Herzog and Sugia[14] after reviewing a number of studies concerned with father absence stated the following:

> With regard to academic performance, it seems unlikely that father absence in itself would show significant relation to poorer school achievement, if relevant variables (including type of father absence and SES) were adequately controlled.[15]

Sciara[16] studied the achievement test scores in reading and math of over 1000 inner-city black fourth graders over a two year period and found statistically significant differences favoring the academic achievement of both boys and girls from father present homes. Father absence had a much greater effect in this study upon both boys and girls whose measured I.Q. score was over 100.

Past studies fail to arrive at consistent conclusions regarding the effects of father absence upon the academic achievement of black children.

Against this perplexing background of information, the author decided to examine the possible effects of father absence by analyzing the representation of black children in the remedial reading and remedial math programs of 20 Title I schools in a single midwestern metropolitan school district.

Eight of the most deprived schools in this school district had been previously (1972) included in model cities schools. From evaluation reports of these schools, the father absence rate in black families had been established at 30 percent. Using this figure as a referent, the question of degree of representation of black youngsters from father absent homes in remedial programs could be answered.

It was hypothesized that under-representation (or a figure less-than 30 percent) or average representation (around the 30 percent figure) would demonstrate that father absence had no effect upon the educational achievement of black children in these Title I schools. Conversely, over-representation of black children from father absent homes, in Title I remedial programs would demonstrate the effect of this condition upon student achievement.

Children placed in Title I remedial programs in this school district are those who are judged to be of normal intelligence, but whose achievement tests scores are below average.

A removal of the scores of white children from the list of those in the Title I remedial reading program, allowed the separation of the remaining scores of black children to be divided into those from father absent homes and those from father present homes. This is shown in Table 1.

TABLE I

A BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY STATUS
OF BLACK CHILDREN IN THE TITLE I REMEDIAL
READING PROGRAM 1974-1975

Grade Level	No. of Children From Father Absent Homes	Percent	No. of Children From Father Present Homes	Percent	Total
2	13	54.16	11	45.83	24
3	47	70.14	20	29.85	67
4	40	54.79	33	45.20	73
5	45	48.38	48	51.61	93
6	26	63.41	15	36.58	41
	MEAN	58.17		41.81	

Children from father absent homes are definitely over-represented in the Title I Remedial Reading Program. Ranging from a low of 48.38 percent in the 5th grade to a high of 70.14 percent in the 3rd grade, their overall percentage is 58.17, nearly double the expectancy.

An analysis of the Title I remedial math program reveals a similar pattern. This is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

A BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY STATUS
OF BLACK CHILDREN IN THE TITLE I
REMEDIAL MATH PROGRAM 1974-1975

Grade Level	No. of Children From Father Absent Homes	Percent	No. of Children From Father Present Homes	Percent	Total
4	60	64.51	33	35.48	93
5	35	49.29	36	50.70	71
6	35	56.45	27	43.54	62
	AVERAGE	56.75		43.24	

With an expectancy of 30 percent, Black children from father absent homes range from a low of 49.29 percent in the 5th grade, to a high of 64.51 percent in the 4th grade in the remedial math program, with an average of 56.75 percent. Over-representation in the remedial math program is evident.

No attempt was made to ascertain the percentage of white children from father absent homes in Title I remedial programs because no referent on which to base expectancy was available for this population. Nationally, the rate of father absence in white families is slightly over 10 percent. If this figure were used (and is reliable for this population), it appears that white children from father absent homes would be over represented also in the Title I remedial programs.

The over-representation of black children from father absent homes in the Title I remedial programs would tend to support the notion that father absence does have a definite effect upon some children's academic achievement. Caution must be used in any attempt to generalize this effect beyond the sample studied. Since the information was drawn from children in remedial programs only, knowledge of the academic performance of other black children from father absent homes in these 20 Title I schools is not known. A comparison of this type could produce additional information which might strengthen or weaken the conclusions from the study of black children in Title I remedial programs.

To many, this is sensitive data which is difficult or impossible to obtain from school districts who fear they may be violating federal laws regarding the right to privacy act.

Some educators may adopt a "so what" attitude, citing the fact that schools cannot change the condition of father absence in the homes of children. Yet, can schools profess to be moving in the direction of "equality of educational opportunity" and fail to study or ignore this rapidly growing condition among low income black families? Father presence would seem to foster greater cohesiveness of family, a greater variety of family activities, a greater quantity of adult-child verbal interaction, and a greater experiential variety than would father absence. These characteristics of family life are activities which are directly related to academic achievement of children and are of the type commonly found in the present approaches of those who seek to increase the parent role in the educational process of children.

If further studies demonstrate the negative influence of father absence upon the academic achievement of black youngsters, then certainly compensatory education programs will be morally obliged to attempt measures which overcome this home condition. A recently published study by Henry[17] in which boys who were read to by their fathers for the six month period immediately preceding entrance into first grade scored significantly higher on predictor instruments for first grade reading achievement than boys read to by their mothers, or boys in an unplanned situation for the same period. When one considers the preponderance of instructional and supportive services in compensatory educational programs which are conducted by females, then the possibility of the need for male influence as a catalyst for accelerated growth in academic achievement, for some children, looms as a potential consideration.

FOOTNOTES

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Abstract

Father Absence, An Overlooked Factor in the Lack of Achievement of Black Children in Title I Schools

Studies of the past present conflicting findings regarding the effects of father absence upon the academic achievement of black children. In this study, children in remedial reading and math programs from 20 Title I schools in a single midwestern metropolitan school district were studied. The father absence rate for black children in this school system averaged 30 percent. Representation of black children from father absent homes in remedial programs beyond the 30 percent rate would appear to substantiate the notion that father absence does have a definite effect upon the academic achievement of children.

It was found that 58 percent of the black children in the Title I remedial reading program were from father absent homes with slightly over 56 percent of the same type of children found in the Title I remedial math program. This is almost double the rate of expectancy.

A reluctance by public schools to gather or release this kind of data is noted. The author states that additional studies should be done in an effort to analyze the effects of father absence on academic achievement.

Schools cannot change the condition of father absence in a child's home, but to effect equality of educational opportunity for some children, they have a moral obligation to attempt compensatory measures which help to overcome this phenomenon.